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RIVER-FRONT EMBANKMENTS

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To the urban river the embankment is an absolute necessity; unrecognized, it is true, in the case of most cities until so late as to make its realization needlessly difficult and costly but none the less sure of ultimate recognition for all that. The most obvious reason for the neglect of the river fronts of most American cities is doubtless public apathy, pure and simple, and apathy from which a good many other things suffer as well as waterways, but a fundamental misconception of what is charming and desirable in waterways generally is, I believe, partly responsible too.

The beauty of the naturally winding stream with its banks untrammelled by any artificial restraints, and even of the estuary with its tides in ceaseless ebb and flow, is dinned into us so persistently in our early years that it is very hard for us to get over the feeling that our first and last duty to so obviously natural an object as a river is to let it alone, and on the whole there is hardly anything that we are taught to dread so much, and to avoid so scrupulously, in topography as in conduct, as the artificial. It all comes back, of course, to the fact of the overlapping or the confusion of the conflicting claims of city and country. You can have natural beauty in the country and the artificial easily becomes the impertinent it is true, but the city is distinctly and unreservedly a product of human ingenuity and artifice and the more frankly its true character is expressed in its constructions the better. The river has as much right to come into the city as the people have, but like them it should leave its rustic ways behind; no more meanderings, and no more mud banks. Urbanity in rivers, as in men, means tidiness and culture, and culture means restraint and adaptation to environment.

I put the esthetic reason first because it is evidently the most cogent in spite of the reluctance of many well-meaning advocates of civic betterment to accept this conclusion and the tendency among people generally to underestimate its claims, but the sanitary and economic reasons are just as sound and, in some quarters, more read-

ily admitted. The neglected urban river promptly degenerates into an open sewer, as everybody knows, and even if the remedy of intercepting sewers does not necessarily imply embankments the civic prudence that provides the one is pretty sure to suggest the other, especially where the sanitary improvement will naturally follow lines that involve a good deal of river bank reclamation and that obviously coincide with desirable parkway extensions. Besides, the public health is not concerned exclusively with what is underground, the sewer is all right but so is the open sunshine and the enterprise that builds the one will demand the other. Now the river bank is the natural place to take the air the world over. The water courses provide, always and everywhere, the most accessible and inviting of pleasure grounds, and the saddest mistake that the growing town ever makes in the way of wasting its resources through want of foresight is its neglect of the river which almost universally runs by it or through it.

It is usual to blame the railroads for the squalid water fronts that are far too common in American towns, but this is a lame excuse and, as a matter of fact, there ought to be a good lesson rather than a cause of complaint in the present perfectly natural and, as far as it goes, perfectly proper development of the waterways as commercial thoroughfares. The railroads did well to appropriate the river banks to their own uses; the only trouble is that the cities have done ill in not seeing to it that their rights were respected and their interests advanced as well as those of the railroads, by the kind of treatment which the river banks received. Even where it does not go underground as it usually will in following the embankments of great cities, a railroad is not necessarily an eyesore and a nuisance, by any means, and as electricity replaces steam there will be less and less excuse for such objectionable qualities as we have been accustomed to regard as their inevitable accompaniments. A very little experience with such supervision as is already exercised by art juries and art commissions has taught us that bridges, viaducts, etc., may be real architectural embellishments just as well as unsightly blemishes if the public will insist on having its rights respected and a decent regard for appearance recognized as a legitimate factor in the designing of such structures. Few sights are more disheartening than the ragged edges, of which the river front is sure to be raggedest and most unkempt, of the vast majority of American towns which are fortunate

enough to have any railroad facilities at all. But it is worth remembering that this untidiness has nothing to do with the necessities of the case and that in countries where these things are better understood and the demands of good taste more respected, the railroad and its adjuncts constitute not only unobjectionable, but very often indeed, exceedingly impressive features of the place.

It is coming to be so here in the case of the passenger terminals of the great cities and it is hardly conceivable that the advantages of a dignified treatment of so potent a force in modern civilization will long be limited to a single feature or to a few exceptionally favored localities. The railroads have not only appropriated the river banks, they are rivers themselves; they have contributed enormously to the growth of the towns they skirt—in unnumberable instances they may almost be said to have actually created them—and they have a right to a good and prominent place in their plan. It is all wrong that they should look as they often do, as if they were sneaking in by a back door apparently ashamed of themselves and the part they play in the economy of the place, when they might come in with all the pomp of conquerors. No, there is no need of the squalid railroad environment on the river bank or anywhere else and the fact that the railroad is already there cannot be accepted any longer as an excuse for neglect and unsightliness in what ought to be the most attractive part of the city. But, in all great cities at least, and in many of the smaller ones too, for that matter, this means that there will be embankments with the railroads underground, as they are in Paris and London. It may, I think, be regarded as settled that the subway is indispensable, for the urban embankment is nothing if not a parkway, and the parkways with railways in them or over them are almost unthinkable, but underground is the best place for the railroad anyway, whenever you can afford it, and this is one of the times when you have got to afford it. It would be a mistake, however, to regard the expense of such an improvement as an extravagance. Considered as an investment pure and simple, nothing pays a city better than this kind of reclamation of what is bound to be about the best part of it, if it is not treated in such a way as makes it about the worst. It is curious how the very names by which they are known indicate which of these two characters has been developed in a particular locality. Water front spells dignity and charm almost anywhere while waterside has come to be a synonym for

much that is most unspeakable. The river, which is largely responsible for the very existence of the city, is sure to play a prominent part in its life and it is almost inevitable that where its neighborhood is not treated with becoming respect it should promptly degenerate into a slum. Now, all esthetic considerations aside, slums do not pay. Even on the lowest possible ground of dollars and cents, the reclamation, or conservation, of its river banks presents as good an opportunity for profitable business as a city can have. Money must be spent of course—all improvements mean capital invested—but in the long run nothing pays like judicious improvement. The civic betterment, which the present day is so much occupied in discussing, is chiefly concerned with three things uniformly neglected in the early days of almost every center of population and earnestly striven for when civic consciousness is at last awakened. None of the three, housing, circulation or recreation, will take care of itself. The character of residential sections, the adequacy of avenues of communication, and the provision and proper location of parks and playgrounds are all things which if secured at all are the result of deliberate and arbitrary interference on the part of the constituted authority of the municipality with the "natural" tendencies which unregulated individual interests are sure to develop.

The river embankment question embodies so obviously and in such even proportions all three of these phases of the civic betterment problem that it may fitly serve as the type, and not unfairly be made the test, of progress in the development of civic ideals.

The embankment is first of all a parkway, but this implies an avenue, if not of commerce then of recreation, possibly, and even preferably, under certain conditions, both. Certainly the promotions of such forms of commercial distribution as belong of right to the riverside, and provision for which by means of commodious and attractive quays would almost of necessity form a prominent feature of the wall which fixes anew the actual margin of the stream, should be recognized as a most important factor in the whole proposition. Curiously enough this is one of the features of the subject that is least understood and such active opposition as the improvement is likely to encounter usually comes from the dread of injuring—after the railroads—the commercial activities which make more or less use of the localities in question. This is all a mistake of course. The quays which will form an essential feature of the embankments will

take much better care of the traffic that belongs to the water than is possible under the unkempt conditions that precede the improvement and the active life of this increased traffic will always constitute one of the chief charms of the results attained.

And the neighborhood itself, what of that considered as a place to live? Are not the advantages that will accrue to it from the real estate assessors' point of view the most obvious and compelling after all? We have fought very shy of the urban housing question so far, contenting ourselves mainly with schemes for relieving congestion, which means planning and hoping to induce people to live as far away from their work as possible. This is well enough as far as it goes, and it must be admitted that the progress which rapid transit has made in recent years has enabled it to go pretty far, but however far this idea is carried and however extended the suburbs may become, it must not be forgotten that urban life means condensed population and while it is quite true that thousands of citizens will be able and ready to live at an indefinite distance from their places of business, the millions who do the real work will never have either the means or the inclination to do so, and the problem of city housing will still remain substantially the same problem that it has always been.

This means that the city is not to be made habitable by schemes to take the people out of it. Places for them to live must be provided in the city itself or the question of urban residence is not faced at all. Now urban housing of a condensed population means flats and family hotels; it cannot possibly mean anything else. And to talk about substituting cottages in Arcadia for homes in the city is simply to beg the whole question. City housing properly speaking then is successful to just the extent that it can be kept central and no city can afford to have waste land in its centrally located portions. The river embankment is sure to be central; if properly treated it is sure to be attractive, and the fairly big buildings in which the real townspeople of the city of the future will certainly live cannot have a better location than that which the embankments will provide.

Materially, then, as well as morally, from the point of view of the resident as well as that of the trader, for the sake of convenience and utility as well as of beauty and the public health, no city can do better than take care of its water fronts and no fairer measure of its civic consciousness and civic pride will be available than the spirit in which it improves the opportunities which the river embankment affords.